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Loving America With Open Eyes: A Student-Driven Study of U.S. Rights in the Age of Trump

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Loving America with Open Eyes: A Student-Driven Study of US Rights in the Age of Trump

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When Emma Goldman was put on trial for encouraging young men to resist the draft during World War I, she was accused, among other things, of being unpatriotic. In her speech to the jury, Goldman (1917) offered her own definition of patriotism: "The kind of patriotism we represent is the kind of patriotism which loves America with open eyes" (p. 158).

What does it mean to love America with open eyes?[1] It is a question I have pondered greatly, in and out of the classroom, since the election of Donald Trump. Goldman (1917) said, "[W]e love America…but that must not make us blind to the social faults of America" (p. 159). Inspired by Goldman, I believe that to be a patriot is to question one's country and seek the answers to those questions. Part of the way in which I enact this patriotism is through my teaching. That is, my students and I ask tough questions about the past, present, and future of America, and we seek to answer them. In doing this inquiring, we are learning and striving to be patriotic. In fact, I see such patriotic learning and teaching to be vital to the future of America.

This paper recounts how, during the 2016–2017 academic year, my group of fourth graders, prompted particularly by the election of Donald Trump, asked tough questions about their country and then sought to answer them. I begin by placing this story in the context of our school and its commitment to teaching and learning to promote social justice. I then story our curricular work in the wake of the election, focusing on our exploration of constitutional rights and the Civil Rights movement. I conclude in the spring of 2018, as my students (then fifth graders) marched for tougher gun legislation with students nationwide.

My School

As I tell my students during writing workshop, setting matters. Thus, it's important to understand my school community and how this curriculum was able to blossom there. I work in a progressive public elementary school in New York City's East Harlem neighborhood, a community with a rich history and culture that has been undergoing gentrification in the last few years. When walking from the subway to school, I pass new businesses replacing old ones, signs in both Spanish and English, a strong police presence, housing projects next to partially constructed luxury housing, murals on the sides of buildings, old brownstones, community gardens and centers, and a variety of public, private, and charter schools. Mount Sinai Hospital is across the street, as are the Museum of the City of New York, El Museo del Barrio, and Central Park.

1 When I use the term "America," I am referring to the United States of America, but I am mindful that "America" is also used to denote the entirety of the continents of South America and North America.

The students come from all the different types of families who live in this neighborhood, as well as from other neighborhoods across the five boroughs. As a result, our community is uniquely diverse in a way that many New York City schools are not, though the diversity of our population continues to change with the neighborhood and with public school policies. Moreover, while our school has a strong reputation, it is certainly not for everyone. We don't believe in grades, punitive discipline, or lots of homework. Most students come here because their parents and guardians believe in progressive education.

In my school, progressive education means that students' voices are central to the learning process and that we as teachers must create space in the classroom for the diverse voices of our students. Play and creativity are important, and both teachers and students are trusted to make choices about learning. Therefore, my classroom may look very different than another classroom because in my school, learning and teaching are personal.

Central to our school's shared pedagogy is the importance of teaching for social justice. We believe that education is not simply a pursuit of knowledge and truth, but also the development of an awareness of the world around us, our differences, the inequities that exist within those differences, and how to fight those inequities. While our dedication to teaching for social justice influences how we teach social studies, it also informs how we teach all subjects, the choice of books we have in the classroom, what stories we read, what trips we go on, how we navigate problems, how we speak to our students and to each other, and how we as a school respond to world events.

To be the patriot Emma Goldman describes, I think it's essential to have a school that values multiple perspectives as well as the questions and passions of the people in that school community. I was able to pursue this inquiry with my students in part because the idea of asking questions about one's world and finding answers is already deeply embedded in my school's culture.

Living the Questions

The night Donald Trump was elected, I asked questions: How did this happen? What will happen next? I tried to make sense of what seemed incomprehensible. I had been confident that Trump would not be elected because I had been confident that the hate he wove into his campaign did not have a place in America.

Then came a more pressing, practical question: What am I going to teach my fourth graders tomorrow? It was a tough question. I didn't know how I would feel when I woke up, let alone how they would feel.

In moments of confusion and distress, I always find myself turning to questions. While answers can be constraining, questions often open things up. In *Mosaic of Thought*, Keene and Zimmerman (2007) describe the transformative power of questions in the classroom:

> [T]he root of *question* is *quest*. We must think of setting out on a quest to learn more, to better understand friends and family, to pursue passions and interests, to make sense of our worlds. Many questions don't have clear, direct answers, and these are often the most intriguing ones—questions worth lingering over. (p. 107)

I wanted to give my students an opportunity to make sense of what was happening to them. To make room for their questions, I decided to lead a restorative circle, a structure I use in my classroom to allow students to talk about issues that affect them, in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. This particular circle would focus on asking questions.

At the beginning of the circle, I read students the following excerpt from Rilke's Letters to a Young Poet :

> Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. (As cited in Clifford, 2013, p. 27)

Figure 1. Students in my classroom participate in a restorative circle (November 9, 2016).

My students lay in the center of the rug on their backs with their eyes closed (see Figure 1). Without being called on individually, they were invited to offer questions to the group with the expectation that they would not get an answer. Even though they didn't need to ask their questions in any particular order, I still expected my students to ask them one at a time, which meant the students had to listen closely to the questions that were being raised and wait a moment before asking their own. In this way, their questions lingered in the silent space of our room. Among questions about deportations, sexual violence, war, and discrimination, two basic questions continued to be asked in various forms:

- What rights do we have?
- How do we protect ourselves when we disagree with the government?

These questions would become the focus of our inquiry into our rights as Americans, a curriculum that would teach us, through questioning and research, to love America with open eyes —a curriculum that bloomed out of this restorative circle after the election of Donald Trump.

Changing the Curriculum

In my school, each teacher is with a group of students for two years. I teach fourth and fifth grade. When Trump was elected, we were in the first three months of the cycle. The plan had been to study indigenous Americans in fourth grade and social movements in fifth grade. Shortly after my class held our circle, my grade team met to plan our social studies curriculum for the rest of the year.

Various curriculum maps and books about indigenous Americans were spread out on the table before us. However, these materials lay untouched as our conversation veered toward the recent presidential election. I shared the questions my students had posed in the restorative circle. My colleagues shared similar stories about their own students, the concerns they had, and the discussions that were taking place everywhere: in the classroom, in transition from one activity to the next, during morning meeting, in their writer's notebooks. We also thought about the urgency we felt to take action ourselves. Lawyers were volunteering to assist immigrants worried about being deported, the ACLU was bracing itself to defend the US Constitution, and women across the country were preparing to march in what became the biggest single-day protest in US history (Waddell, 2017).

What if, my grade team mused, we simply switched the order of our curriculum?

I'm lucky that my school allows teachers autonomy, that we value the responsiveness of curriculum and student voice in the classroom. When my grade team ran the idea by our administration, they were supportive. Similarly, when we told parents, they were enthusiastic and grateful that we were listening to their kids.

Back in a restorative circle, I proposed the idea to my students. I told them that I had been inspired by their questions and that I wanted to know if they wanted to explore those questions further. I told them that we would study indigenous Americans the next year; we would address the students' urgent and pressing questions this year.

The air in the room changed. Flickers of smiles appeared on my students' faces. They made eye contact with one another, sat up, straightened their spines, and leaned in to listen to what I was saying. They were excited. They were ready.

What Rights Do We Have?

It was a bright November morning. Sunlight poured through the large, old windows in my classroom. My students sat in a circle, leaning forward to read questions written on pieces of chart paper: What is a right? What rights do you have? Who has rights? Who doesn't have rights? (See Figures 2, 3 and 4.) The questions alone energized them. They grabbed for markers and pens. My student teacher and I repeatedly gave silent signals to calm the students down to listen to the directions. They were split up into groups of

four and given one of the four questions. Using colored markers, they wrote answers to the questions, talking and arguing with their classmates as they worked.

Figure 2. Students in my classroom reflect on what rights they have (November 2016).

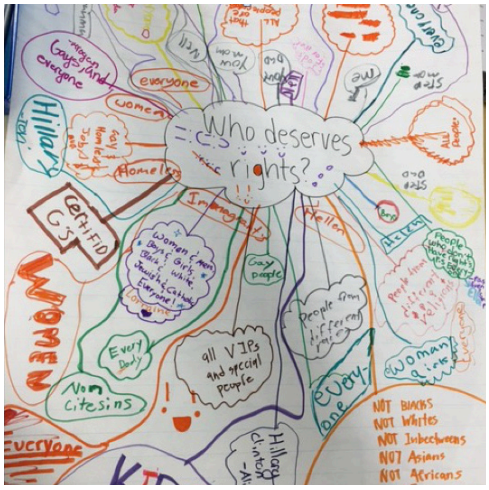

Figure 3. Students in my classroom reflect on who deserves rights (November 2016).

Figure 4. Students in my classroom try to define what a right is (November 2016).

These posters amounted to an inventory that my student teacher and I felt was important to take before beginning the work, not just to assess what the students already knew about rights but also to get them thinking about a right as something that directly connects to them, both individually and as part of a community, in a personal and meaningful way. Since I have always believed that civics is the study of the relationship between the government and the governed, I thought it was important that from the jump, students saw themselves in the content we would be learning about and how it related to their everyday lives.

So many of my students' questions and ideas centered on the concept that we, as Americans, have shared rights. As such, I thought it was logical to begin our study with a close reading of the Bill of Rights as well as the later amendments to the Constitution.

As we discussed each amendment, there were many surprises. For instance, the children were shocked about the order of the amendments—that the right to bear arms was the Second Amendment while the right for black people to be free from slavery was Thirteenth, and the right for women to vote was the Nineteenth. Students were especially surprised that people have a right to not be searched without probable cause, as many of them had witnessed a very different reality in their own neighborhoods.

We ended our study by creating our own classroom constitution. Each table became a "state" that collectively listed the rights they thought we all should have in our classroom. Each state voted on a delegate to represent them. Then the delegates met together, each with a list of the rights their states had generated, and collaborated on a final constitution:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF ROOM 410, HAVE THE RIGHT TO…

1. BE OURSELVES
    (a) We have the right to do work in our own way.
    (b) We have the right to not be judged for anything on our outside or our inside.
    (c) We have the right to choice in our classroom.
    (d) We have the right to express our feelings in a comfortable way.

2. BE CARED FOR AND RESPECTED

3. PRIVACY AND SPACE

4. TO BE TREATED FAIRLY
    (a) We have the right to be treated the way others want to be treated.

5. TO LEARN

6. TO HAVE A RIGHT

7. TO HAVE FUN

8. TO FREEDOM OF SPEECH

9. TO FEEL GOOD ABOUT OURSELVES

10. TO FEEL COMFORTABLE IN ANY GROUP
    (a) We have the right to not be discriminated against because of our genders, races, or personalities.

We taped our constitution to each table so it could be referenced when we were struggling with conflict in the classroom. If a student made noise during quiet work, other students would claim their right to learn was being violated. When I would require students to show their work during math, they would remind me that they had the right to do work in their own way.

We were using this constitution to figure out how to treat one another and how to interpret policies that the authorities of the classroom (including me) tried to enforce. In short, we were doing the work that Americans do.

Already, a quiet understanding was forming: the rights we are afforded in our country are not as straightforward as we might initially think; some people have rights while others don't; the idea of freedom is complex; and most importantly, hidden in our country's philosophy and policies are countless inequities.

How Do We Protect Ourselves When We Disagree with the Government?

One of my students leaned in close to a photograph taped to the wall. He held a stack of sticky notes in his hand, but he seemed to have forgotten about them for the moment. His eyes were locked on a black-and-white photograph that was curled and spotted with age. In it, a man carries a hand-painted sign that reads "WHITES ONLY" in large red letters. My student's eyes glazed over. For a moment, I wondered if he was crying. He stood there for a long time. Other children milled around him, chatting, writing, and sticking their notes to other photographs and quotes taped to the wall. The student stood gazing, frozen in the sea of moving bodies. I wanted to ask him if he was okay and to talk with him—but before I had a chance, he hastily bent over his table and scrawled something on the sticky note. Fixing it to the photograph, he moved on, leaving his friends in his wake. They hovered over the note, and instantly there was a big reaction. Their eyes grew wide, their hands went to their mouths, there was a stray giggle here and there. I walked over and read what was written on the sticky note: "*THIS IS BULL$%^&.*"

A few weeks before this lesson, I had embarked on my own research of the Civil Rights movement. I read books, watched documentaries, examined photographs, and listened to freedom songs—all work that I would eventually ask the students to do. I scrawled questions and reflections in my notebook. I jumped out of my chair to share videos and words with my husband. Our conversations about John Lewis, Claudette Colvin, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the Freedom Rides were punctuated with discussions about what was happening in the news. Women marched across their cities. People crowded the airports and courthouses to protest the illegal barring of Muslim people from entering the United States. With the threat of the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, citizens crowded town halls and demanded lawmakers to answer their questions.

I chose the Civil Rights movement as a case study in order to explore the broader topic of rights in our country because I felt that while there were many answers to the question of how we protect ourselves when we disagree with the government, the Civil Rights movement told a clear and accessible story of action within a context that most kids in my classroom were familiar with. Moreover, the tactics of the movement—nonviolent protest, marches, sit-ins, and boycotts—illustrate a variety of acts of peaceful resistance that have been used effectively in our country to make change. Most importantly, my students already understood and talked about racism. Many of them had either experienced or witnessed racism themselves, and they were all aware of the inequality and mistreatment to which people of color have been and still are subjected in our country.

We began our unit by viewing a gallery I had constructed in the classroom of various images and quotes from the Civil Rights movement (see Figure 5). Around the room, I hung photographs of protesters lying in

the street while police clubs were suspended in mid-swing; signs that called for white supremacy forever; quotes from activists explaining how it felt to participate in a sit-in; and quotes from segregationists arguing that black people are inferior to white people. Students walked around that gallery of primary sources, holding a stack of sticky notes, writing down what they noticed and what they were wondering about each quote or photograph, and attaching those notes to the primary source that had elicited those reactions. These primary sources would stay up throughout our study, alongside the students' comments and questions—including the vulgar response to the "WHITES ONLY" sign, because the hate in our country is vulgar and that student was right to be angry about it.

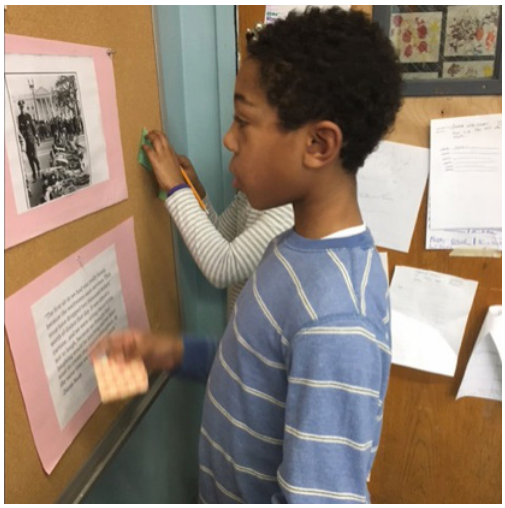

Figure 5. A student in my classroom inspects a photograph of a protest from the Civil Rights movement era (January 2017).

If my students were going to learn to love America with open eyes, I thought it would be important to teach them to answer questions they had about their country for themselves. Therefore, I decided to anchor this work in literature and text, with the hope that the students would use the researching skills we would learn in class to continue their pursuit of the truth about America long after our unit was finished.

We began by reading *Witnesses to Freedom: Young People Who Fought for Civil Rights* (Rochelle, 1993), a text that mixes primary and secondary sources to tell the stories of young people during the Civil Rights movement. As we read, we took notes in a variety of ways, all adapted from the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project's *Constructing Curriculum: Alternative Units of Study* (Calkins, Ehrenworth, Khan, & Mooney, 2010). We asked ourselves what the people we were reading about wanted and needed and which groups were most likely to get what they needed (p. 259).

The first chapter of *Witnesses to Freedom* begins with an account of Barbara Johns and the resistance she led at R. R. Moton High School. Many students said that Johns and her classmates wanted better conditions at their school, such as heat and books that didn't have torn or missing pages. They concluded that the students of R. R. Moton High School wanted change, equality, and educational freedom. When asked what the school board and the KKK, which was threatening Johns, wanted, my students felt they wanted conditions to stay the same.

We also applied these note-taking strategies when examining other primary sources, like excerpts from PBS's *Eyes on the Prize* documentary (Ambrosino et al., 1987) and listening to and reading the lyrics of the protest song "We Shall Overcome" (Tindley, 1900). Students watched, frowning, as Elizabeth Eckford walked through a mob of violent, furious white people at Little Rock Central High School in 1957. Students recorded their reactions to the scene, entering them in two overlapping circles drawn on pieces of paper. One was labeled "past," and the other was labeled "present." Students wrote frantically about how different the clothes were and about how black children no longer need protection to go to school, but that segregation still exists in our schools.

When we listened to "We Shall Overcome," we sang together and then reflected on communal singing as a social movement strategy. We asked ourselves why protesters sang. Our answers to these questions became a class book we wrote together (see Figures 6 and 7). Each student had their own idea about why protesters sang, but one message was clear: many voices were stronger than one.

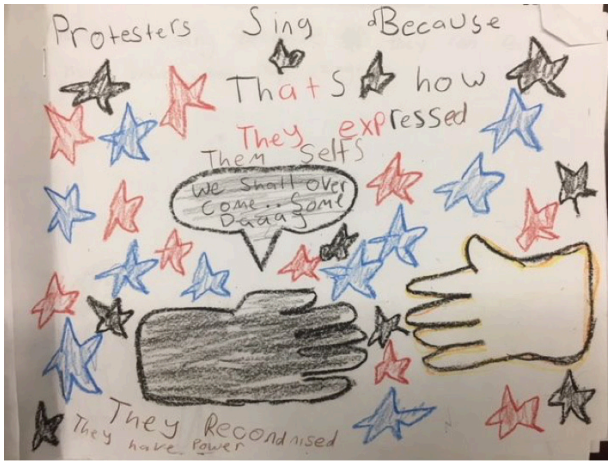

Figure 6. A student reflects through words and pictures why protesters sang, interpreting song as a way protesters expressed themselves and gained power (March 2017).

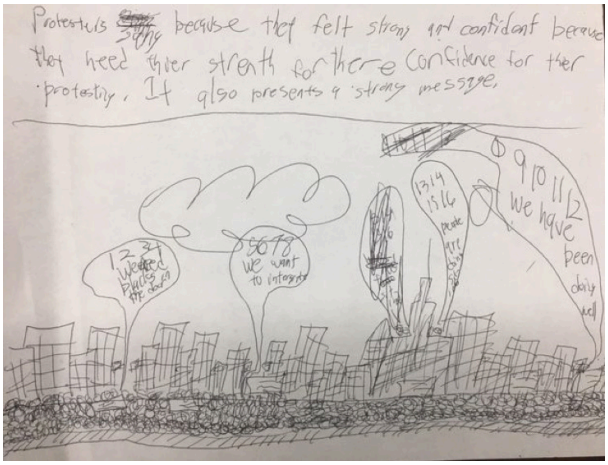

Figure 7. Another student reflects on why protesters sing, considering that protesters sang together to gain confidence and strength (March 2017).

In almost every lesson, children would raise their hands and ask the same question, "How did all this happen?" Potent silence filled the classroom as we struggled to respond. Being confronted by this question forced us all, no matter who we were, to face something: not a specific, concrete answer, but rather the necessity of asking the question in the first place. In these moments, I would invoke the thought exercise that had started our work. I would tell the students that I couldn't answer the question; rather, we would have to live it, through our work, through our research, and through our own experiences.

And we were living it. Events in the country dripped into our classroom like a leak. We started reading the newspaper, especially on days when protests occurred, and they occurred often that year. Students made connections between the contemporary protests and the protests they were learning about from the Civil Rights movement. A portrait was forming in their minds, not just of America, but also of their tentative places in it.

In the spring, I collected a series of nonfiction texts from Capstone Press' *We Shall Overcome* series (2014-2015). Each told the story of one aspect of the Civil Rights movement. Over two days, students previewed the books. They took notes, looked at text features and photographs, reflected on what they thought the book might be about, and noted what questions they had and what they found interesting. Then each student ranked their top three choices of books to read. From these choices, we formed research groups, in which four to five students each read the same book about the same topic and discussed what they were learning together.

From their research and discussions, students ended our yearlong study by creating performance projects to display what they had learned. They were allowed to choose how to express their knowledge, in whatever format they wished. Some students taught lessons, some wrote songs, and others wrote plays or performed spoken word poetry.

One group made comics. One of the students in that group had been studying the Freedom Riders, and when I saw that he had created a comic about a man not being able to board an airplane, I realized that he hadn't understood the text at all. However, he insisted that he knew what the Freedom Rides were and that his comic was how he imagined them. Then he said that he wondered if it even mattered if he got it exactly right.

It was an important question. What *did* it matter if we got this right? To answer that, I decided to show the group a video I had found early on in my planning, of Jim Zwerg, a Freedom Rider, in a hospital bed after being brutally beaten by segregationists. Face bloody, eye swollen, he said:

> We're dedicated to this. We'll take hitting. We'll take beating. We're willing to accept death, but we're going to keep coming until we can ride from anywhere in the South to anyplace else in the South without anybody making any comments, just as American citizens. (Fayer, 1987)

As they watched, my students were quiet, their brows furrowed. When it was finished, they asked to watch it again. And again. More people from other research groups came to watch. As we discussed the

video, my students talked about all that Zwerg had risked to fight for the right of African Americans to ride interstate buses and how he was even willing to face death for the fight for integration. They decided he was doing this because it was important to him as well as to society. They wondered honestly if they could do what he had done if they were in his position. Some said they could and would because it was just as important to them. Others weren't sure because of all the risk it would bring along with it. In the end, they all concluded that it was an incredibly brave thing to do. The student who hadn't understood the book went back to his comic and started afresh. This time, his comic told the story of Zwerg in the hospital bed. Every frame was drawn with the intent of depicting exactly how it had happened (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Through writing and illustrating a comic book, a student visualizes Jim Zwerg's Freedom Ride and subsequent hospitalization (May 2017).

What Is a Patriot?

To be a patriot means to love one's country with open eyes. This means that to be patriotic, we must listen to the questions we have about our country and seek answers. In our study of rights in our country, my students and I loved America with open eyes. We asked what rights we have in our country, and we found our answers in both expected and unexpected places. We came to know the amendments of the US Constitution. We learned that, as Americans, these amendments express our rights; but we also learned that these rights are open to interpretation, that they do not protect everyone, and that debate and discourse over them are as much a part of our country as the rights themselves. We also learned that in many situations, this discourse over rights can be used to oppress and exclude.

Through the study of the Civil Rights movement, we sought to answer the question of how people have fought for their rights in our country. What we found were stories of community organizing, civil disobedience, protest, and song. In our study, we found a country to love—and this included not turning away from our country's faults.

Time has passed, and I find myself thinking daily about one of the questions I asked myself the night Trump was elected. What will happen next? I, like my students, am still seeking answers. I conclude here with a story of 25 patriots I witnessed last spring. While their actions don't fully answer my question, I think they brought me closer to doing so.

On February 14th, a high school student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, shot 17 people. On February 15th, a group of students who had survived the shooting got together to try to end gun violence in our country. They started a national movement that inspired thousands of students across the United States, including my now fifth graders, the same students who a year before had learned about the Civil Rights movement. Once again, my students lay down in a circle, their gazes directed upward, and offered their questions into our classroom: How did a student get his hands on a gun? Will teachers really be armed? How are we being protected? What can we do? Why do these guns even exist? How can we help the students who survived?

As a class, they decided they wanted to take action. When I asked them what they wanted to do, they offered strategies that they had learned about the year before: make posters, write songs, raise money, boycott, walk out, produce a newscast, write about the event, and educate people.

On March 14th, 22 of my 25 students marched out of the classroom carrying signs with slogans against gun violence. (One student chose not to participate; the other two were absent for medical appointments.) In the hallway, other students who wanted to participate in the walkout waited for them. My students handed them extra signs. In whispers, as they walked down the stairs, they taught chants to each other that they had heard at other protests or made up in the days before the march. When they got outside, they raised their signs and voices and led the other students in chants while they walked up and down Madison Avenue, for 17 minutes, without stopping (see Figures 9, 10, and 11).

Why does this make them patriots? Because at the heart of Emma Goldman's definition of patriotism is the word love. To love something means to care about it—and to fix it when it's broken. My students have asked important questions about our country, questions that through our research revealed not only the ways in which our country was and is broken but also how we can repair it: through using our voices, by standing up for what we believe in, by organizing and coming together. This has been the work of our patriotic classroom. I can't say what will happen next, but watching my students on that cold early spring afternoon, I saw a glimpse of a possible future, and in that future, there is love.

Figure 9. Students from my class gather in the hallway with the rest of our school community to join in the nationwide student walkout (March 14, 2018).

Figure 10. Students in my class lead both children and parents in the walkout in our neighborhood (March 14, 2018).

Figure 11. Students from my class carry handmade signs and lead chants as they walk down Madison Avenue (March 14, 2018).

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